

National Farmer Wellbeing Report 2023: Farming's silent crisis

Jane Richter

Published in late March 2023, the National Farmer Wellbeing Report research was commissioned by Norco (the 100% farmer-owned co-operative based in northern NSW), in partnership with the National Farmers' Federation, and with additional input from the Black Dog Institute. The research surveyed 1,338 Australian farmers aged 18+ with representation from all states and territories across Australia, as well as a cross section of farming sectors. You can download the full report at bit.ly/23-farm-wellbeing

The report paints a saddening picture of the mental health of Australia's farmers with almost one third (30%) reporting a decline in their mental health over the past few years.

Farmers are typically brave, optimistic and resilient people. We take the knocks that would cripple many other people and we eat them for breakfast! But it has been an incredibly trying few years in this country for farming with extreme weather events – bush fires, storms, floods, droughts – coupled with the impact of other factors outside of our control like rapidly rising costs, labour shortages and supply chains upended by the pandemic.

What other profession has to manage the same breadth of responsibilities and level of risk, all the while being asked to do one of the most important jobs in the land; to produce the safe and nutritious food that we are all 100% reliant upon for our very survival?

Whilst it is not new news that some farmers experience poor mental health outcomes, this new report suggests that it is more widespread than previously understood. In recent years, nearly half of Australian farmers (45%) have felt depressed, with almost two thirds (64%) experiencing anxiety. For one in seven (14%), it's a frequent experience.

Even more devastating, close to half of Australian farmers (45%) have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide, while close to a third (30%) have attempted self-harm or suicide. This is a staggering number and one which demands urgent national attention.



According to the report, the way in which farmers' mental health struggles manifest themselves appears to vary noticeably according to gender. Women tend to report depression and anxiety in greater numbers, while men pose a greater risk when it comes to self-harm or suicide.

And age makes a difference too. The older generation has experienced the biggest decline in mental health over the past few years, with approximately 40% of those aged 45–64 reporting a downward trajectory.

What is driving the decline in mental health?

Natural disasters and weather impacts (47%) understandably topped the list for farmers trying to identify the triggers but financial stress (36%) and cost pressures (35%) both made it into the top 3.

Quantifying the impact across the country of natural disasters, the report found that 88% of Australian farmers have had their farming operation significantly impacted over the past five years, with an average cost of \$1.4 million per farm.

Digging deeper into the numbers a clear picture emerges of a more complex problem with 76% of farmers surveyed feeling that the role they play is undervalued by the Australian public. We produce the food that consumers simply take for granted.

What should be alarming for those same complacent shoppers is that two in five farmers (40%) have contemplated leaving the industry, citing not only the physical, emotional and financial pressures, but also the perception that farming is no longer valued in Australia as key reasons.

What's more, a quarter of Aussie farming families (24%) report being in their 'final generation' as they either don't want their children to take over the farm, or their children don't wish to follow in their footsteps citing the pressures and uncertainties of farming being too great (29%) and the financial rewards being insufficient (24%) as two major reasons.

The impact is not being felt in the same way across all sectors of farming, but horticulture is in second place with 44% of surveyed horticulture farmers reporting a decline in their mental health.

More than a quarter of all farmers (27%) say feelings of loneliness or isolation, combined with limited access to mental health services have had the biggest impact on their mental health over the past five years.

Respondents to the survey also believe that rural and remote communities are forgotten about and left behind when it comes to public policies and services, with one in ten (11%) calling for more support and funding from the Government.

Findings from the Report also indicate that many farmers are suffering in silence with more than half (51%) not wanting to burden family or friends with their problems or are simply not comfortable discussing them.

For those who have experienced mental health challenges, close to one in five (17%) did not want to seek or receive help, while one in ten (11%) felt too embarrassed to do so. One in seven farmers (15%) also reported difficulty accessing suitable services in their community.

What can we do to support our farmers?

While some macro factors – such as the weather and the global economy – are impossible to control, the research identifies several mental health triggers over which we can potentially exercise some influence as well as opportunities to improve access to support.

With the endorsement of the National Farmers' Federation, Norco has developed 3 key recommendations aimed at galvanising action among consumers, farmers and the industry as a whole.

1. Aussie Grown

Encourage consumers to actively choose Australian farmer products. In order to help restore much-needed pride within the farming community, more can be done by consumers to recognise and champion the critical role farmers play in our society. There is a role to play here for our industry marketing campaigns, educating and connecting consumers with the farms where their food is grown with pride, sweat and tears and the farmers who shoulder all of the risks.

2. Check In

Call on farmers to "check in on a mate". Anecdotal research and the findings of this report indicate that farmers respond best to other farmers, who are uniquely placed to understand the challenges they're facing. In rural communities where loneliness and social isolation is rife, it's never been more important for farmers to stay connected to one another. Whether by attending industry or community events together, dropping in to help out with some farm work or even just picking up the phone, it's important to maintain those social connections during tough times.

3. Advocate

An industry-wide push to create a 'Farmer's Army' of mental health advocates. Norco is also calling on the farming industry to follow their lead by investing in mental health training for their workers. For Norco, this includes offering Lifeline Crisis Supporter Training to all field officers, select co-op farmer members, the senior executive team and Board of Directors, so that they have the right tools and can develop the skills to identify and provide support to farmers who may be struggling.

In addition to Norco's recommendations, the National Farmers' Federation is calling on all levels of government to urgently assess the resourcing they provide to farming communities to support wellbeing and mental health.

"This country is built on the backs of our farmers. If our farmers do well, then we all do well. We need to make farmers feel valued again," comments Norco CEO Michael Hampson.

FARMER TO FARMER: WHY IT'S GOOD TO TALK

Ross Blanch has been a dairy farmer for more than fifty years - but for close to three decades he's also been working as a Lifeline Crisis Counsellor, providing guidance and care to individuals struggling with mental health issues.

His work in this space since has seen him travel the country and provide support to those in need following natural disasters such as the equine influenza outbreak, as well as victims of cyclones and floods. Four years ago, motivated by the emotional toll the drought was having on farmers, Ross began operating a farmer-to-farmer call line, a service that was established by Lifeline Queensland.

"Farming is tough, both financially and emotionally," he says. "Farmers tend to brush off their issues and say they'll be alright – but it's extremely important that they have someone to talk to who understands and has experienced the same struggles they are."

He often speaks to farmers who feel helpless and out of options, largely due to financial challenges, or the flood recovery process, many of whom are sadly considering suicide – but he says the work that he does helps to bring farmers to the now rather than looking back.

"I acknowledge what they've been through but help to bring them out of the past and into the present," he says. "It's a really important strategy in crisis counselling that helps them to change their thinking patterns, and after an hour and a half you can see a mentally healthier person."

"Access to support, especially from someone who understands firsthand what they're going through, can be lifesaving - and more work needs to be done to ensure our farmers right across the country feel supported, especially when times are tough."

If you or anyone you know needs help

Lifeline	13 11 14
Beyond Blue	1300 224 636
Suicide Call Back Service	1300 659 467
Headspace	1800 650 890
ReachOut	au.reachout.com
MensLine Australia	1300 789 978
Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN)	1800 008 774
Head to Health	headtohealth.gov.au
SANE Australia	1800 187 263 or sane.org
Wellmob	wellmob.org.au
The Ripple Effect	therippleeffect.com.au
Rural Financial Counselling Service	nema.gov.au
Rural Aid	ruralaid.org.au

Other resources that can be helpful

Royal Flying Doctor Service Booklet

A new Royal Flying Doctor Service booklet '*Mental Health on the Land*' aims to provide support to individuals and families struggling with mental health issues.

Funded by a grant from Thankful4Farmers, the booklet includes topics like:

- Keeping well
- Dealing with difficult times on the land, grief and loss
- Strategies to reduce loneliness
- Responding to trauma, anxiety and depression
- Resources & contact details for further information & support



This response is part of an ongoing effort to help break down the barriers that prevent people in rural and remote areas from accessing help. The help resources contained in the new booklet are Queensland based - but the content is relevant to every farming family or individual.

Download it at bit.ly/RFDS-MentalHealthBooklet

ifarmwell.com.au

The ifarmwell website has been designed by Australian farmers to help other Australian farmers cope effectively with life's challenges and get the most out of every day. It does this by sharing practical ways of coping with difficult circumstances, thoughts and feelings (especially worries about things you can't control) and helping you to work out where it is most useful for you to put your attention and energy.

You can do this from the privacy of your home, tractor or shed.

ifarmwell can be accessed on your computer, smartphone or tablet - anywhere that you have internet access. The site will even send you text message reminders to keep you focused, and it's free!

The website is designed to be useful for BOTH farmers who are currently feeling down or stressed AND those who would simply like some new tools to improve their ability to cope with uncertainty associated with life on the land.

ifarmwell aims to transform the wellbeing of farmers and their supporters, in order to build agricultural communities and businesses that thrive.

Access all the tools and support now at ifarmwell.com.au

